

CHAPTER V

MICHIGAN'S COORDINATED ACCESS TO FOOD FOR THE ELDERLY (MiCAFE)

Elder Law of Michigan, Inc., a non-profit organization that provides legal counseling services for low-income seniors, implemented one of the three USDA application assistance demonstrations. The organization partnered with the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA) and the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) to develop the demonstration, known locally as Michigan's Coordinated Access to Food for the Elderly, or MiCAFE. Trained program staff and application assistants, many of whom were seniors themselves, helped clients apply to the FSP using a web-based application system that included nutrition and health assessments. Assistants also helped support seniors once they qualified for food stamps if they encountered questions or concerns about their benefits. Elder Law operated a call center that application assistants used as needed for technical assistance on FSP rules.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

Located in the City of Flint, the McCree FIA office is one of three FIA offices which serve Genesee County, and was the selected pilot site for the demonstration in Michigan. The agency advertised translation services and application assistance by caseworkers for clients who needed help in accessing benefits. Under demonstration procedures, FIA waived the in-person eligibility interview for first-time senior applicants, eliminating the need for a trip to the local office. Services made available to MiCAFE clients by program staff included assistance in using an on-line application, collecting and submitting relevant paperwork, informing seniors about additional resources, and facilitating any necessary followup with caseworkers. The call center operated by Elder Law provided technical assistance to application assistants.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. FIA uses a 15-page combined application for all assistance programs, which includes rules and notices. To apply

for food stamps (or “food assistance” as it is referred to in Michigan), seniors request an application by mail, phone, proxy, or in person. Officially, caseworkers¹ can help applicants of all ages fill out the paperwork if help is needed, though it is unclear to what extent the elderly seek their assistance. A notice explaining that help is available for filling out the application appears on the first page in English, Spanish, and Arabic. The agency also provides translation services as needed. Seniors often go to the FIA office in person and complete an application in the waiting room, which makes it easy to ask a clerk or caseworker for help. Those applicants who choose to see a caseworker that day may wait for one to two hours if staff are particularly busy. Walk-in applications are accepted weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.

Seniors submit completed applications to the local FIA office in person, by mail, or by proxy. (Supplemental Security Income recipients also can submit a food assistance application to a clerk at this office, who will forward it to FIA.) Food assistance staff then schedule an in-person interview to determine eligibility. However, caseworkers conduct this interview over the phone or during a home visit if the client faces a substantial barrier to traveling to the FIA office (e.g., transportation or poor health).

The period of recertification depends upon an individual’s circumstances. If a food stamp recipient is a senior and/or disabled, and also receives Supplemental Security Income or Retirement Survivor’s Disability Insurance as their sole source of income, they only need to recertify every 24 months. However, those with unearned income or countable earnings must recertify every 12 or 6 months, respectively.

MiCAFE Service Delivery. For the MiCAFE demonstration, the application assistants helped seniors at a variety of service sites and in places that afforded privacy and confidentiality, such as offices or computer labs. As of July 2004, there were 22 MiCAFE sites, including 14 sites in Flint (the Valley Area Agency on Aging, Mount Tabor Baptist Church, the Spanish Speaking Information Center, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program office at the Zimmerman Center,² three clinics run by Hamilton Community Health Network, the Hispanic Technology Center, the Flint Housing Commission, two housing developments, and three senior centers) and eight sites throughout the county (six senior centers and two senior residential complexes).

Providing application assistance involved three fundamental steps: general intake, completing the on-line application, and referrals to other nutrition and social services. Interested seniors could make an appointment through the senior center. Available hours

¹ FIA divides caseworkers into two groups—family independence specialists and eligibility specialists. Family independence specialists handle all types of cases, whereas eligibility specialists focus on Medicaid/FSP-only cases and other non-cash assistance cases.

² The Zimmerman Center is a multi-purpose community center for Flint Community Schools.

and scheduling strategies varied from site to site. Some assistants only scheduled appointments, some provided assistance during certain times of the week, and some provided services whenever the sites (e.g., senior centers, churches) normally operated. After seniors made an appointment, the center sent them a reminder with the list of things to bring for verification.

Once intake was completed, the assistant then printed the application out for the senior to sign, photocopied the verification documentation (e.g., Social Security statement), and forwarded the application packet to the McCree office, either by mail or hand delivery. If the applicant did not bring the necessary documentation to the session, the application assistant gave the senior a personalized verification checklist listing the items that needed to be sent to the FIA office within 10 business days. Otherwise, the caseworker rendered the application invalid (unless there were extenuating circumstances, such as when a third party would not provide the documentation despite client requests), and the client was told to resubmit a new application. (Seniors could simply re-sign the original application and resubmit it within 30 days of the initial submission to FIA.) However, most seniors brought all documentation to their appointment with MiCAFE staff. Completing the electronic application usually took between 20 and 70 minutes, depending on the technical aptitude of the assistant, the speed of the Internet connection, the complexity of the applicant household, and the extent of informal conversations between the application assistant and client.

Lastly, the MiCAFE assistant—using some information collected during intake as a starting point—explored whether there were other nutrition and social services besides food stamps for which the senior might be eligible. The computer system included a section that screened seniors for congregate and home-delivered meal programs. Depending on the answers to these questions, the computer automatically displayed a list of nearby congregate meal sites, home-delivered meal programs, service providers who do assessments for nutritional counseling, and other resources. Application assistants printed out the contact information based on geographic location and the needs of the clients, who then took responsibility for contacting the service provider if they chose. In addition, program staff prepared information folders for each MiCAFE participant that contained (1) a description of Michigan's public benefits rules and regulations, (2) an explanation of how to use the EBT card, and (3) a list of emergency food providers. Clients also had an opportunity to learn about using their Bridge Cards at various points-of-sale terminals through the EBT Training and Education Project (see training section).

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. To lessen the burden of applying for food assistance, demonstration participants were not required to travel to the FIA office for an in-person eligibility interview. If follow-up information was needed from the clients, caseworkers conducted the questioning over the phone, during which time they informed the senior of any supplemental documentation that was needed or determined if the client wanted to enroll in a program that was not checked off on the application form (for example, Medicaid). If seniors seemed confused, caseworkers encouraged them to contact their MiCAFE application assistant, who could help them resolve the particular issue, sometimes by conferring with the FIA office.

Staff estimated that the waiver for in-person interviews saved them approximately 30 minutes per client. Less than half of all MiCAFE applications required some degree of follow-up by the caseworker, but it was usually resolved with a quick telephone call. The most common reason for an incomplete application was that the client still needed to collect paperwork outlined on the MiCAFE verification checklist.

Demonstration participants who came up for recertification had to have a face-to-face interview with a caseworker because the waiver applied to new applications and not to recertifications. However, according to state law, if a client declared a hardship (for example, disability or illness), a client could complete a telephone interview in place of the face-to-face interview. (In-person interviews were still required for those clients with earned income.) This hardship waiver applied to the majority of the MiCAFE population.

Call Center. Elder Law operated a toll-free call center that served as a support tool for application assistants who had questions about the food stamp application or encountered technical problems when helping seniors complete an on-line application. Call center staff also could call the FIA caseworkers if a senior had not heard a decision about eligibility determination or had a problem with the application. Any questions about FIA policies were forwarded to the McCree office, although this rarely occurred.

Elder Law developed protocols for call center staff to use in addressing a variety of inquiries from clients and application assistants, along with an on-line version of the user support manual. Application assistants could refer to the manual as they delivered services, which proved to be a useful on-site technical assistance resource. In addition, program staff established a database to track all incoming calls. The program manager from Elder Law routinely reviewed all logged calls to ensure that application assistants were receiving accurate information. On average, topics fell into the following categories: technical questions about the application (20 percent), questions about the content of the food stamp application (10 percent), and “other,” such as confirming receipt of the application at the McCree office or questions about food assistance benefits (15 percent). The remaining 55 percent of the calls were from the general public.

In designing the MiCAFE system, software developers installed a quality control mechanism to help ensure that applications were being completed as accurately as possible. Program staff from Elder Law automatically received an e-mail message whenever an application assistant made an error (for example, entering an invalid birth date). At the same time, the assistant was prompted on the screen to contact the call center for technical help. Frequently, however, the application assistants were familiar enough with the system to correct the error independently. Still, the program manager or call center staff followed up on all error messages to make sure that the situation was resolved appropriately.

Nutritional Assessments. In addition to FSP application services, the application assistants conducted nutritional assessments of elderly clients. During intake, seniors completed an on-line nutrition assessment, and provided information on social services that they currently received (application assistants entered answers onto a computer for the clients). The Nutrition Risk Assessment contained 16 questions; sample questions included: *Does the client eat fewer than two meals per day? Does the client have tooth or mouth problems that make it*

hard to eat? Does the client experience nausea and/or vomiting? Answers to these questions created a Personalized Nutrition Screen Report that was automatically generated through the MiCAFE system. The Chronic Illness Inventory asked clients if they took medications for chronic illnesses, as well as whether they were diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, dementia, kidney disease, Lou Gehrig's disease, mental illness, multiple sclerosis, or Parkinson's disease. Results from this assessment enabled Elder Law to better understand their clients. Staff provided clients with educational materials related to the chronic illnesses listed on their assessments. Program staff estimated that intake lasted about 20 minutes.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Several public and private groups played important roles in the planning, development, and implementation of the MiCAFE program, including the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA), the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA), Elder Law of Michigan, Nordic Technologies, Inc., senior centers and other community-based organizations, and an advisory board. Table 5.1 outlines the contributions that stakeholders made to the demonstration.

While the Michigan OSA took the lead in writing the grant proposal and coordinated much of the program's development, Elder Law implemented the MiCAFE program on a day-to-day basis, including providing training, delivering direct services to seniors, conducting the public education campaign, and acting as a liaison between application assistants and FIA. Two part-time Elder Law staff members administered the call center, though by year two one of these workers became a full-time call center operator while the other transitioned into an administrative role for all Elder Law initiatives. FIA caseworkers processed MiCAFE applications in a manner similar to how they processed other food stamp applications, and the agency's district manager was consulted in the early planning stages. Otherwise, FIA played a secondary role in the demonstration.

OSA recruited the initial group of senior centers to become MiCAFE sites, while Elder Law recruited subsequent groups of senior centers to become MiCAFE sites with OSA's guidance, though other types of sites (for example, a senior housing complex) joined the network throughout the demonstration. Slightly fewer than half of all individuals who served as application assistants were volunteers, and several were senior center directors. Most volunteers were over 60 years old, while paid staff (for example, senior center directors) usually were over 50 years old.

To guide the program's development, Elder Law invited several organizations to participate on the MiCAFE advisory board. Rather than hold regular meetings, Elder Law decided it would be more efficient to ask members to convene as needed throughout the planning process. The board consisted of more than a dozen representatives from such diverse groups as senior centers, health departments, university cooperative extension, food assistance programs, and a representative from a pharmacy association.

Table 5.1: Roles and Responsibilities of Key Stakeholders in the Micafe Demonstration

| Stakeholder | Primary role(s) |
|--|---|
| Michigan OSA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualized and wrote USDA grant proposal • Facilitated operations through interagency agreement with FIA • Identified initial participating senior centers • Maintained application system and provided technical support as needed • Distributed funding and served as resource to Elder Law as needed • Delivered computer training |
| Elder Law of Michigan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped conceptualize and write grant proposal • Identified subsequent participating senior centers • Managed day-to-day operations, provided training, supervised application assistants, operated and staffed call center, handled outreach, prepared budget reports and quarterly reports, and assisted in development of on-line application • Responded to assistants' inquiries |
| Michigan FIA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtained waiver from USDA • Served as fiscal agent; not involved in direct operations • State office gave input during design phase • Local caseworkers processed MiCAFE applications and answered questions from program staff as needed |
| Nordic Technologies, Inc. ³ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed on-line application software with direction from Elder Law |
| Senior centers and community-based organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served as MiCAFE application assistance sites |
| Advisory board | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided feedback based on specific area of expertise |

³ During the first quarter of 2004, the original contract between OSA and Nordic Technologies, Inc. ended. OSA established a new contract with the Michigan Department of Information Technology (DIT). The department assumed responsibility for maintaining the on-line system. Nordic Technologies still provides technical support through contracts with OSA and Elder Law.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

While Elder Law collaborated with OSA in writing the grant, the Michigan FIA retained ultimate responsibility for the demonstration's outcomes. FIA also retained sole authority for eligibility and benefit determination. The MiCAFE program manager at Elder Law, who managed the application assistants and call center staff, was supervised by the organization's executive director. Elder Law also sent reports on the demonstration's outcomes and issues to OSA and FIA. The advisory board offered input and guidance but did not make binding decisions.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Communication among program staff was facilitated through the call center. Application assistants could access the operators if they had questions, and Nordic Technologies, Inc. designed an electronic message center to facilitate communication between Elder Law staff and application assistants. Application assistants could check for messages from the program manager or call center operators when logging into the on-line system. Through the center, the program manager sent "Reminders of the Month,"⁴ demonstration updates, and information on new resources for seniors.

Program staff found it somewhat challenging to coordinate with approximately 130 FIA caseworkers in processing the MiCAFE applications. Consequently, at the project director's suggestion, the agency assigned four caseworkers to handle all MiCAFE clients and serve as the contact persons if Elder Law program staff had questions or concerns. (This issue is described in more detail in a subsequent section, "Problems and Issues.")

Training

The demonstration included training components for staff and clients. Elder Law designed and conducted training for application assistants and call center operators, and also provided an updated training manual several months into the demonstration. In addition, staff developed the EBT Education and Training Project to help seniors learn about and become comfortable with accessing food benefits electronically.

Training for Application Assistants. The program manager—with input from state FIA officials in Lansing—developed a three-part training for MiCAFE application assistants. The senior center directors recruited volunteers to be application assistants, looking for people who had good social skills, were comfortable working with the elderly population, and had some computer experience.

First, staff attended one of three full-day sessions that gave an overview of the demonstration, the FSP and food assistance benefits, and the general eligibility process. The program manager discussed how application assistance would integrate into the current

⁴ These reminders drew upon tips developed for the staff training.

services available at senior centers. (Program officials initially envisioned MiCAFE assistance taking place only at senior centers.) Participants learned about interviewing skills and how to send an application to the local FIA office. The manager stressed that other staff at the MiCAFE sites (for example, church secretaries) who were not providing application assistance should be made aware of the demonstration so that they would know to whom they should refer seniors who called to ask about MiCAFE.

Second, Elder Law and a representative from OSA delivered a half-day training on the web-based application at Nordic Technologies' computer lab. Participants learned about security issues and how to use the on-line system, and they had the opportunity to complete an entire application. Trainees signed confidentiality agreements and left the session with their user names and passwords.

To complete the basic training, the program manager and a call center operator observed and assisted application assistants with their first clients. These seniors agreed ahead of time to be part of a 'live' training session, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes to allow for periodic technical assistance. Several months into the demonstration and as a followup to the initial training, Elder Law produced a new training manual for all staff; this included screen shots of the on-line system and answers to commonly asked questions that had emerged from call center staff.

For new staff and application assistants who joined the MiCAFE network after the demonstration began, the program manager conducted a training session. By July 2004, Elder Law had trained 88 application assistants, with 79 active MiCAFE assistants (30 senior center staff and 49 volunteers).

Training for Clients. With a private grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, program staff designed the EBT Education and Training Project to teach seniors about using their Bridge Cards to access food benefits in a way that accommodated different learning styles. All MiCAFE sites had a range of teaching tools, including (1) educational flip charts that explained the EBT system in user-friendly language and graphics, (2) written materials inserted in each senior's folder, (3) sample EBT cards, (4) model point-of-sale (POS) equipment, and (5) a video. The video, which was close-captioned and also available on DVD, showed a senior using her Bridge Card in a supermarket and gave step-by-step instructions for accessing EBT benefits at a variety of POS locations. Elder Law wanted to have POS terminals that actually recalculated balances on the sample Bridge Cards, but costs were prohibitive. Instead, the flip charts helped simulate a transaction.

In addition, seniors could access a page on Elder Law's website: "Comfort in Using the Michigan Bridge Card." The page explained EBT benefits, gave a picture and description of a Bridge Card, and listed answers to commonly-asked questions, such as *How do I spend benefits?* and *What items can be purchased with my Bridge Card?*

Outreach Strategies

To inform potentially eligible seniors about MiCAFE, Elder Law used a blend of written materials, mass media, networking, and community collaborations. Outreach efforts

remained fairly consistent throughout the demonstration, though staff focused on political activities during the spring of 2003. Prior to the demonstration, FIA had not sponsored any targeted outreach to increase elderly enrollment in the FSP.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. Program staff consciously decided not to launch an intensive outreach campaign during the first few months to avoid overwhelming the application assistants with new clients. To generate interest slowly, Elder Law mailed postcards to seniors enrolled in a farmer's market program and in the state's prescription drug coverage program before MiCAFE began. Staff selected these subgroups since they were likely to be eligible for food stamps. As is customary with FIA, demonstration staff did not refer to the FSP as "food stamps" but instead spoke about "food assistance."

Written Materials. Elder Law distributed brochures, postcards, and/or posters to a variety of organizations throughout Genesee County, including senior centers, food banks, community centers, churches, pharmacies, soup kitchens, grocery stores, WIC clinics, county health department, and the American Red Cross. Staff distributed brochures or postcards to Meals on Wheels and Michigan's Elder Prescription Insurance Coverage (EPIC) participants as well. Materials in Spanish were included when appropriate, and a modified version of the poster incorporated a description of a MiCAFE help session so that seniors would know what to expect. During the second year, a mass mailing went out to 700 churches across the county.

Multi Media. Elder Law incorporated newspapers, newsletters, television, and radio into its promotional efforts. It also added a link about the demonstration to its website: <http://www.elderslaw.org/micafe>.

Elder Law disseminated press releases to the eight county newspapers and the program manager was interviewed for a feature story in the *Flint Journal*. Soon after, the Elder Law executive director and a senior center director talked about MiCAFE on a local television news program. Subsequent articles appeared in several newspapers, which, according to staff, seemed to generate an increased volume of inquiries to the call center. Notices appeared in monthly senior center newsletters and church bulletins. Moreover, a 60-second radio public service announcement ran 25 times over six weeks during the summer of 2003 on an AM station that targets seniors.

Throughout the demonstration, Elder Law sent out press releases to announce when new MiCAFE sites opened. One such press release led to a television news segment for the afternoon and evening broadcasts highlighting the Mount Tabor Baptist Church (downtown Flint) with the minister and an Elder Law intern who worked there as the application assistant. They also appeared on a radio talk show to describe the benefits of MiCAFE and encourage potentially eligible seniors to apply.

Networking. Program staff engaged in a series of presentations, tabling at community events, and attending meetings with elected officials to help spread the word about the demonstration. A sample of these activities is outlined below:

- Staff met with five state representatives; two state senators; three county legislators; the staff of two U.S. senators, a U.S. Representative, and the lieutenant governor to talk about MiCAFE and distribute information packets.
- MiCAFE hosted a booth at an annual hunger conference sponsored by the Food Bank Council of Michigan and spoke with several service providers; they also hosted a booth on Senior Power Day in Flint, an event that attracts about 1,500 seniors from three counties.
- A Spanish-speaking volunteer sponsored an information table at a local Mexican festival.
- Mount Tabor Baptist Church, which serves as a polling place, set up a display with brochures on Election Day.
- The program manager gave presentations to Flint city officials and the United Way; an application assistant made several presentations at senior housing developments, reaching approximately 125 total seniors.
- In 2004, Elder Law testified before the state appropriations committee to talk about the demonstration.

Community Collaborations. The most formal collaborations for the demonstration involved the various senior centers, community and faith-based organizations, and senior housing complexes that served as MiCAFE sites. Elder Law collaborated with 22 demonstration sites over the course of the demonstration, including some sites that were added along the way.⁵ For example, after two senior centers that hosted application assistants closed in downtown Flint soon after operations began, Elder Law approached the Valley Area Agency on Aging to see if it would be willing to provide application assistance at its downtown facility. Prior to this, the program manager had asked the agency to promote MiCAFE through its congregate meal program and Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program, which it continued to do throughout the demonstration.

Elder Law also explored different avenues for educating the elderly about MiCAFE through community partners. Staff from the Genesee County Community Action Resource Department informed its clients that application assistance was available at some of its congregate meal sites. The agency also inserted brochures into its home-delivered meals. Elder Law invited volunteers from the Tax Assistance Program (TAP) to senior centers to help seniors apply to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and for property tax credits. While on site, volunteers referred interested seniors to MiCAFE.

⁵ Twenty entities sponsored MiCAFE sites, but 1 offered 3 locations, for a total of 22 sites. These figures do not include sites in the expansion counties.

Likewise, application assistants referred clients to TAP as part of their routine service delivery.

To help seniors physically access demonstration services, Elder Law worked with the Genesee County Michigan Transit Authority. The “Your Ride” program agreed to transport seniors to and from MiCAFE appointments free of charge. Officials also agreed to display MiCAFE posters inside public buses.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

Staff restructuring and turnover statewide helped contribute to higher caseloads for the local FIA office. The agency decided to restructure its offices in September 2002 to reduce caseworker burden. In Genesee County, the office created two teams of caseworkers, the family unit and the adult unit, the latter of which concentrated on elderly cases. However, this transition coincided with a decline in the state employee workforce. A budget deficit prompted the governor to authorize early retirement packages, with a total of 1,270 workers taking the offer. The state filled only one in four of these vacant positions. While the McCree office lost only 8 out of 94 caseworkers—some offices lost a greater portion of its caseworkers—remaining staff struggled with concurrently rising caseloads, most likely due to poor local economic conditions.

Due to a decrease in its workforce and an increase in caseloads, FIA officials eventually concluded that the experimental management system had failed. Caseworkers were overwhelmed and found it more difficult to meet the 30-day deadline for processing food stamp applications. At one point, the McCree office was completing 85 percent of all FSP applications within 30 days, though they achieved a 94 percent completion rate for MiCAFE applicants. The FIA district manager in Genesee County also reported that a high incidence of sick leave contributed to overwhelming caseloads. In February 2003, the agency reverted to dividing its caseworker staff into family independence specialists and eligibility specialists, which resulted in more manageable caseloads.

According to respondents, there was not a significant level of turnover among core demonstration staff. However, one state official at the central FIA office in Lansing who played an important role in planning and designing the demonstration accepted the early retirement package. There did not seem to be much turnover of senior center directors, aside from the change in MiCAFE sites described in the next section. Turnover among application assistants was not burdensome.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Staff instituted a number of changes to enhance service delivery and program management. The MiCAFE network expanded to include many non-senior center sites, partially to account for the loss of sites in downtown Flint. To streamline application procedures, stakeholders developed a policy for recertification cases, designated four caseworkers to handle all demonstration cases, and added a heading to MiCAFE applications to distinguish them from regular applications.

Adding New MiCAFE Sites. Program staff worked throughout the demonstration period to identify additional MiCAFE sites. Because two initial demonstration sites closed right after the demonstration started, the demonstration effectively began with only seven MiCAFE sites.⁶ By the 21st month of the demonstration, there were a total of 22 MiCAFE sites. However, as discussed in Section D, the lack of demonstration sites in key portions of Genesee County posed a significant challenge to the demonstration.

Additional MiCAFE sites that were added after the start of the demonstration included the Valley Area Agency on Aging, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program at the Zimmerman Senior Center and the Mount Tabor Baptist Church, all serving downtown Flint. The Baptist church afforded an opportunity to serve elderly African Americans. As the hub of the Latino community, the Spanish Speaking Information Center (SSIC) resembles a senior center in structure but is located in a social service agency. It actively referred clients to local nutrition and social services and resources, and provided five trained MiCAFE volunteers. In the spring of 2004, seven other service providers in Flint became demonstration sites, along with one senior center located outside of the Flint metropolitan area. Braidwood Manor was another addition to the MiCAFE network in a nearby town.⁷

Processing Recertification Cases. Several months after operations began, Elder Law worked with FIA to develop protocols to help seniors who were up for recertification; this service had not been developed for the grant proposal. The McCree office produced a monthly report indicating those seniors whose times to recertify were past due, current, or one month in the future. Program staff mailed these clients recertification packets that included (1) the end date of food stamp benefits, (2) a FIA application, (3) a verification checklist of required documentation and the due date when these items needed to be submitted to FIA, and (4) a letter reminding seniors where they could go to get assistance with recertifying. If they chose to access services through MiCAFE—and they were already demonstration clients—the MiCAFE on-line system could generate a second application without overriding the original application, so only the fields that needed to be changed (for example, assets) were blank. This saved clients some time in filling out paperwork.

⁶ Two of the original MiCAFE sites, which were city-run senior centers located in downtown Flint, were closed shortly after the demonstration started. The city's decision to close the sites was made for budgetary reasons. Eventually, one of the centers reopened and became a MiCAFE site.

⁷ Braidwood Manor is a senior housing complex where apartment staff traditionally have helped residents apply for state benefit programs. This site initially had some exceptions to its demonstration procedures. When it first joined the demonstration, only elderly Braidwood Manor residents who did not receive any FIA-administered public benefits (for example, Medicaid) could apply for food stamp benefits as demonstration clients. To reduce internal confusion, FIA requested that residents who received other FIA-administered public benefits apply to the FSP through the FIA office in McCree. After a few months, arrangements were made to allow all residents to apply for food stamps through MiCAFE, regardless of whether they were receiving other benefits.

The recertification packet also included information about a pre-assigned telephone interview, and instructions on how to call the McCree office and set up an in-person or telephone interview. (As stated earlier, seniors up for recertification still had to have an eligibility interview with a caseworker in person, but a telephone interview could be conducted in cases of hardship.) If seniors missed their interviews or did not call their caseworker by a certain date, FIA sent them missed-appointment letters granting them a 20-day grace period. If they missed this deadline, their benefit accounts expired and they had to reapply as if they were new FSP applicants.

Reassigned Demonstration Caseloads. In October 2003, at the project manager's suggestion, the McCree office selected four caseworkers to handle all MiCAFE applications. Instead of the clerk assigning a demonstration client to one of 80 or 90 caseworkers, a much smaller group of staff specialized in MiCAFE applications. This enabled them to become familiar with the program's procedures and facilitated communication with the application assistants and program staff from Elder Law.

Differentiating MiCAFE Applications. Early on, Elder Law added a MiCAFE heading to its applications so that the FIA office could easily identify them in comparison to regular food stamp applications. Caseworkers often confused the two versions because they looked very similar, and sometimes inadvertently requested that MiCAFE clients travel to the office for a face-to-face interview, a requirement that was waived for the demonstration.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The goals of MiCAFE were to (1) help seniors apply for food assistance benefits, (2) direct clients to existing nutrition services in the community, (3) improve their understanding of the benefits derived from a healthy diet, and (4) increase their comfort levels in using Bridge Cards. Elder Law also was interested in developing and testing new technological solutions for serving in-need populations.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. Representatives from Elder Law of Michigan, the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA), the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA), and Nordic Technologies, Inc. comprised the core project management team. As the state considered which community organization(s) to partner with, Elder Law emerged as a logical choice, since it had experience operating call centers for legal services and had collaborated with OSA in the past. Due to its strong relationships with the local area agencies on aging, senior centers, and other elderly service providers, OSA was positioned to galvanize support for MiCAFE, particularly in encouraging senior centers to serve as application assistance sites.

OSA conceptualized the fundamental structure of the demonstration and wrote most of the proposal, with input from Elder Law and the FIA district manager. It presented the demonstration to FIA as an expansion of Senior Project FRESH and the Michigan Emergency Pharmaceutical Program for Seniors (MEPPS). Senior Project FRESH is an

initiative in which farmers markets make available fresh produce to low-income, nutritionally at-risk consumers; participants receive \$20 coupons to buy produce at local markets. MEPPS is an emergency voucher program for prescription drugs. FIA agreed to become the overall contract manager. Core stakeholders convened an advisory group to discuss their roles in the MiCAFE program. They divided into three subcommittees: technology, marketing, and training; these met throughout the planning process to guide program development.

During the grant writing process, Elder Law and OSA delivered an overview of the demonstration to senior center directors who were participating in Senior Project FRESH and asked them to write letters of support. Senior Project FRESH sites were a good fit for the demonstration because the sites already were familiar with using an on-line application for Project FRESH. Elder Law assessed each senior center through on-site visits to ensure that they had a private office, computer, printer, and Internet access for one-on-one sessions. The organization also described the qualities that application assistants should possess and asked senior center directors to identify potential assistants from their centers.

Elder Law worked with State FIA officials to design an on-line food stamp application and to ensure that it would cover the necessary data fields, was legally appropriate, and met federal FSP regulations. Under an OSA contract with Nordic Technologies, Elder Law and Nordic Technologies, Inc. developed the software. The project management team tested the application over several months prior to MiCAFE's start date, which involved a substantial amount of time and effort. Based on feedback from the Genesee County FIA, Nordic Technologies revised the web-based application to enable seniors to apply for multiple FIA-administered benefit programs as they could with the regular paper-version public assistance application.⁸ The company also modified the software to automatically skip unnecessary questions once the senior applicant selected the program(s) they wanted to apply for, as well as to ensure that data entry would not be tainted by application assistants who might develop their own skip patterns.

In the final stages of program development, Elder Law established a toll-free number for the call center and obtained electronic pagers for its staff, including the program manager and the call center operators. With input from FIA, the program manager developed the training curriculum and materials, and designed the press release and press packets.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

Almost one year into the demonstration, FIA supervisors made a change so that all MiCAFE applications were handled by a small group of caseworkers. When this change occurred, the caseworkers identified some inconsistencies in the way that demonstration participants were tracked. In some cases, MiCAFE clients were not recorded as such, while

⁸ These programs include cash assistance, medical assistance, food assistance benefits, state emergency relief, and child development and care.

other clients were identified as MiCAFE applicants but in fact had not applied through the demonstration. Elder Law staff eventually added a “MiCAFE” header to the demonstration application to distinguish it from regular food assistance applications.

FIA requested that program officials develop a policy enabling caseworkers to more easily contact a client’s MiCAFE application assistant if the client required additional assistance during the verification process. As a result, all application assistants were asked to sign the MiCAFE application so FIA caseworkers could determine which assistant had helped the applicant. The call center continued to act as the liaison between applicants, sites, application assistants and FIA. Using the MiCAFE database, the call center staff could determine which site and which application assistant processed each application. In many cases, FIA caseworkers communicated via email with the call center to communicate issues, and the call center took the necessary steps to resolve the matter.

Program staff observed that in hindsight, they would have incorporated senior housing complexes as MiCAFE sites earlier in the demonstration. Reaching the elderly through faith-based groups afforded a built-in level of trust with its members, and reaching seniors through senior centers allowed volunteers to tap into an age-appropriate audience. However, housing developments (a total of four) were also valuable service sites, particularly since many elderly spend a lot of time at home. As one program official described it, using housing complexes as MiCAFE sites would allow “services to come to the home.” If the county were to continue the demonstration, at some point that official would be interested in exploring a collaboration with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Transportation was a key factor that influenced the program’s implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. State officials selected Genesee County for the elderly nutrition demonstration due to its sizeable low-income elderly population and the challenges that seniors face in accessing the McCree FIA office. A significant portion of the county is rural, and all non-demonstration applicants must travel to Flint to participate in a face-to-face interview with a caseworker. According to stakeholders, not only are some seniors afraid to go into downtown Flint because of crime, but the distance also can be an obstacle. Taking the four outlying rural towns into account, the average roundtrip drive into Flint is 40 miles, or about 50 minutes of driving time.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

Program staff encountered several challenges in implementing the MiCAFE program, including the closing of two application assistance sites, disjointed service delivery at certain sites, staff shortages within FIA and the McCree office, communication challenges between caseworkers and program staff, and times issues in developing an on-line application.

Closing of Downtown Sites

The principal challenge faced by the MiCAFE demonstration was the limited reach of the demonstration within the city of Flint, where much of the county's low income elderly population resides. As a result of a municipal budget deficit, the City of Flint was forced to shut down two downtown senior centers that had also been selected as MiCAFE sites soon after the demonstration began. One of these sites—the Hasselbring Senior Center—provided a host of services and potentially could have exposed a large number of seniors to the MiCAFE program. These closings substantially essentially eliminated the demonstration's presence in the downtown area.

The Valley Area Agency on Aging (VAAA) offered to serve as a demonstration site in January 2003. While this facility provided the demonstration with access to the downtown population, the facility was less accessible than some of the senior centers. The VAA was not easily accessible to seniors with transportation limitations, and those entering the building were required to go through potentially-intimidating security procedures. Other sites serving downtown flint were added later in June 2003 (the Spanish Speaking Information Center), July 2003 (the Zimmerman Center), and October 2003 (the Mount Tabor Baptist Church). The Hasselbring Senior Center reopened in March 2004, but the number of services provided by the center was scaled back.

In short, the demonstration, which effectively started with only 7 MiCAFE sites, was using 22 sites by the end of the 21 month evaluation period. Nevertheless, the demonstration's effectiveness might have been different if all 22 MiCAFE sites had all been operating from the start.⁹

Staff Turnover and Shortages at FIA

FIA staff reported that, due to a depressed economy, caseloads had started to increase before the demonstration began. As discussed earlier, early retirements and subsequent staff shortages placed pressure on local caseworkers in terms of handling these increasing caseloads. Moreover, the demonstration faced a loss of institutional knowledge when a few key state officials who were closely involved in the development of the MiCAFE program took early retirement. Elder Law reported that communication with state FIA officials remained challenging due to this turnover. While they were supportive of the program, it took a while for their replacements to become familiar with the demonstration's rules and procedures. At the local FIA office, the supervisor eventually assigned four specific caseworkers to handle demonstration clients, as opposed to applications going to any one of 86 caseworkers; this helped mitigate the effects of the staff shortages and minimize the impact on processing MiCAFE applications.

⁹ Seven sites were added three months before the evaluation period ended.

Developing an Electronic Food Stamp Application

Originally, Nordic Technologies intended to create a ‘static’ application that did not change in response to what information was entered in the application. However, along with Elder Law and OSA, they decided to develop a ‘dynamic’ application so that the system could determine which application questions were relevant given, earlier responses. As a result, it took longer than expected to develop the more complex software programming.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

MiCAFE yielded several program successes. Application assistants helped seniors navigate the paperwork and assisted them in the process of entering information into a web-based application system. This made the experience of applying for food stamps easier and less intimidating. Elder Law staff, who have earned a reputation of being helpful and approachable, also made seniors aware of other nutrition and social services and resources that they could choose to access. Additionally, the modified application procedures under MiCAFE saved time for both caseworkers and clients.

Usability of On-line Application

Many stakeholders praised the user-friendly technical environment of the on-line food stamp application. Most application assistants found the application easy to navigate and to complete. In fact, the district manager for the McCree office hoped that the MiCAFE software could eventually replace what she perceived to be the agency’s outdated, cumbersome computer system.

Simplifying the Application Process

According to the program’s design, application assistants were able to help seniors apply for food assistance, explaining which documentation was needed for caseworkers and making themselves available as ‘ambassadors’ if clients became confused in dealing with the local FIA office (e.g., if they did not understand a letter from a caseworker). Application assistants entered all information into the MiCAFE electronic application, which further simplified the process for the elderly population and made applying for food stamps less intimidating. The EBT Education and Training Program provided elderly clients with practical information simulations and gave them the opportunity to become familiar with accessing benefits with a Bridge Card before using it for the first time.

Linking Clients to Multiple Benefits and Services

Application assistants sought ways to link elderly clients to other nutrition and social services and community resources through the nutritional and health assessments that were filled out on the computer during the one-on-one sessions. Staff provided seniors with a list

of service providers that they could contact directly for additional assistance, such as LIHEAP.¹⁰

Effective Program Staff

Various stakeholders reported that demonstration staff from Elder Law were committed to the goals of MiCAFE, and were consistently responsive, helpful, and accommodating to program participants. In addition, the call center provided a great deal of support to application assistants if they had questions while ‘in the field,’ and assistants had a user support manual to address commonly asked questions. The program manager also reviewed the call center phone logs to ensure that operators were providing accurate information to MiCAFE assistants. These added layers of quality assurance and support helped ensure that seniors received correct information and that applications were completed appropriately.

Program officials also reported that using volunteers as application assistants worked well for the demonstration. Volunteers were committed and wanted to dedicate their time to helping low-income seniors access food assistance. At least 50 percent of the application assistants participated throughout the entire demonstration period. However, it is important to remember that matching well-intentioned individuals who also have the necessary skills to work with MiCAFE clients is an important ingredient for an effective, efficient program.

MiCAFE Saved Time for Clients and Caseworkers

Waiving the in-person eligibility interview for first-time applicants saved time both for seniors and for FIA caseworkers. Caseworkers reported that eligibility interviews normally lasted an average of 30 minutes. If clients who dropped off their applications wanted to see a caseworker that same day, staff estimated that clients could wait up to two hours on a busy day.

In addition, FIA staff reported that MiCAFE applications tended to be accurate and complete, which saved caseworkers time if they did not have to conduct a lot of follow-up communication with seniors to collect additional verification documentation, or if they did not need to redo portions of the application. They also observed that the demonstration did not create a burden on their caseloads, nor did it significantly alter their job responsibilities.

¹⁰ Service providers from MiCAFE sites reported that while some seniors who had never accessed services at the sites (for example, a senior center) before the demonstration and did not return once they successfully applied to the FSP, they remained optimistic that these clients would return at some point in the future and take advantage of their services.